

CONTRIBUTIVE LEARNING

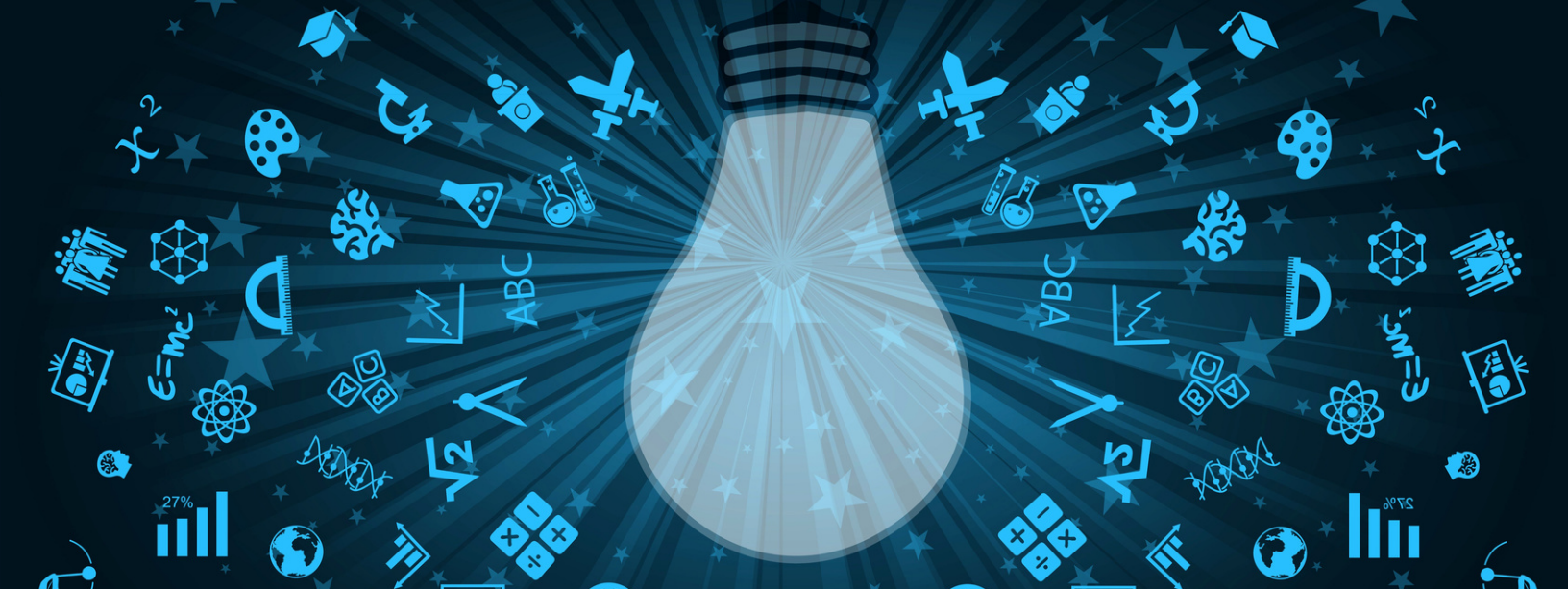
EDUCATION FOR **POSITIVE**
ACTION AND IMPACT



JOANNE MCEACHEN
MATTHEW KANE

THE LEARNER FIRST

MAY 2023



Introduction

In 2018, we proposed refocusing education across four overarching learning areas. By supporting the development of self-understanding, connection, knowledge, and competency, schools could teach students what it takes to contribute—not in a specific or standardized way, but in personally relevant, purposeful ways unique to individuals' interests and goals. Doing so would form a closer alignment between academic success and well-being and lead to positive outcomes both in school and over lifetimes.

Today, years of research and partnerships with schools, along with recent global events and technological developments, have solidified the importance of Contributive Learning, of uniting education with positive application so its uses improve people's lives and the world. It's a process worth prioritizing in every classroom and school, because when self-understanding, connection, knowledge, and competency are integrated in everyday academic learning, students are happier, more engaged in their learning, and more capable of shaping the futures they want. Globally, there's nothing more important or empowering.

... uniting education with positive application ...

We've written that the best possible outcome we can hope for, from any academic, professional, or personal pursuit, is that it contributes in some way to our sense of well-being, and to that of any others whose lives are impacted. Education can enable these outcomes at scale when contribution is the recognized, realized purpose of learning, the gift of our years spent in school.



Joanne McEachen

Founder
The Learner First



Matthew Kane

Research Director
The Learner First



Contribution

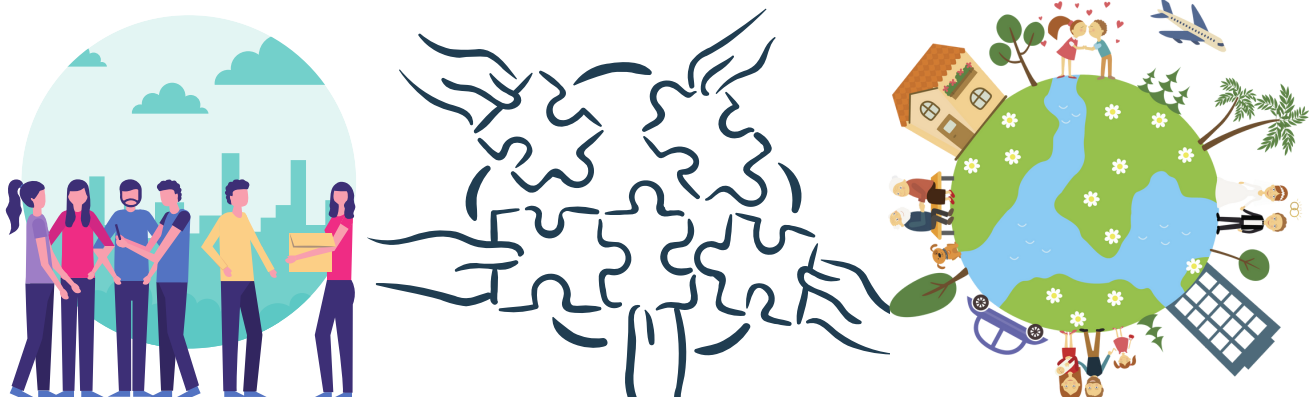
The value of learning is found in application, when it's used to solve a problem, perform a task, or teach others. Schools make efforts to link learning to outside, "real-world" applications because doing so makes learning more vital and engaging. ("You're learning this so you can use it in a personally interesting way" goes over better than "You're learning this so you can use it on a test.") But saying that application is the ultimate purpose of learning falls short of the mark, because our interest extends to *how* learning is applied—what's the impact or effect of our actions in the world? We all want to be on the receiving end of positive actions (actions that impact our lives for the better), and we want the same for the people with whom we're closely connected. These interests establish two aims of learning: *application* and, more importantly, *positive impact*. One word ties them together: **contribution**.

We define contribution as impacting someone or something for the better. It refers both to the act of contributing and to something contributed (i.e., something that's manifested as a result of our actions). It can happen on a grand scale, like with scientific discoveries or solutions to global problems, or on the smallest interpersonal or individual levels, when we contribute to our own or another's well-being.



... impacting someone or something for the better.

Well-being is what we want for ourselves and the people we're close to. It's happiness, health, a sense of fulfillment, success in our personal and professional lives—a "wholeness" experienced to varying degrees. We can think of contribution as an action or impact that unequivocally adds to experienced well-being—your own, someone else's, or some other entity's. Our impact on others shapes how we feel about ourselves; we experience the greatest sense of wellness and fulfillment when we're able to contribute to people's lives and the world.



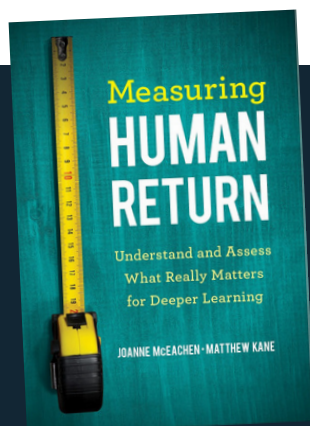


Learning

Contribution is the ultimate purpose of learning and the action most tied to our sense of well-being. These conclusions are drawn from the voices of students, parents, educators, and other community members across diverse school communities, and through a process (detailed in *Measuring Human Return*) that invited them to describe what they want for (or as) learners, to identify the components of those outcomes, and to detail what it looks like when someone has achieved them—"What is success, and what's needed to get there?"

Contribution is the action most tied to well-being.

Collectively, their descriptions shaped three distinct categories: (1) outcomes of learning, (2) applications of learning, and (3) ends attained through the application of learning. Desired learning outcomes involve knowing and being confident in who you are; feeling connected with the community and its population; being knowledgeable about the world and various subject matter; and having the competency or skills to perform relevant tasks. Identified ends include happiness, health, fulfillment, and other components of well-being. That leaves the middle—what's the bridge between learning and well-being?



Measuring Human Return

Measuring Human Return (McEachen and Kane, 2018) lays a framework for measuring students' self-understanding, sense of connection, academic knowledge, and competency. Illustrated by wide-ranging case studies and examples from partner schools around the world, it details a systemic approach to school-wide improvement and key strategies for bringing Contributive Learning to life.



Well-being can be impacted by occurrences outside our control. To the extent that it's within our control, or to the extent that we have the power to contribute to or detract from it, the bridge between learning and well-being is contribution. The desired applications of learning identified by stakeholders all describe various ways of contributing, such as having a good job, treating people well, making a difference, or, comprehensively, "contributing to society." People want those in their communities to use what they learn to act positively and productively. As contribution flourishes, so, too, do communities.

As noted above, when communities identify their desired outcomes of learning, those outcomes fit within four learning areas:

- **Self-Understanding**
- **Connection**
- **Knowledge**
- **Competency**

These areas comprise the extent of human learning. Our development within each area, and their subsequent interplay, dictate our behavior, capability, and activity. When present and coexistent—i.e., when someone has self-understanding, a sense of connection, relevant knowledge, and key skills or competency—that individual will contribute to the world; when these elements come together, contribution results. The following descriptions help to illustrate why.

Self-Understanding

When people learn about who they are (their interests, capacities, histories, beliefs, personalities, goals, histories, and so on), they learn what's important to them, what they value and stand for, and, therefore, how to live and what to do with their lives. Self-understanding reflects a belief in your capacity for success and an understanding of how to go about achieving it. It involves learning about your place (how you "fit") in the world, and about how your history and surroundings shape your values and behaviors. Above all, self-understanding adds purpose to learning—it steers us in personally relevant directions.

Connection

In addition to people, we can feel connected to environments (digital, natural, or built); to their plant or animal life; to a pursuit, object, profession, or idea; or to various other entities (e.g., a company, a team, or another group or community). Our level of connection with a person or entity is a reflection of what we deeply and truly desire for them. If you care about their well-being and want to improve it, you're connected. On the other hand, disconnection from a person or entity opens the door for intentional harm. If self-understanding adds purpose to learning, connection ensures that your purpose is positive—that it's directed at adding to wholeness or well-being.



Picture a learner called **Maya**. She's a bright student whose classes are a breeze. She has good relationships with her teachers and classmates and has no trouble working with others, coming up with creative solutions, or communicating her ideas. But she also doesn't know what's important to her. Her classes aren't sparking any particular interests, and she doesn't have any passions outside of school. As a result, she doesn't see much of a purpose for learning. She goes through the motions, but without **self-understanding**, success in school hasn't given her direction in life.

Self-understanding gives students their "why."



Knowledge

Knowledge helps us solve problems, reach goals, interact, and much more. There are many branches of knowledge, extending across academic subject areas and into every other aspect of daily life and activity. Consider all the inputs of any given day. Our minds are constantly gathering and processing bits of information, which then influence our beliefs, our behaviors, and so on. With unlimited information at everyone's fingertips, and the more that human knowledge is subsumed into A.I. and other technologies, the more important it becomes to augment knowledge with other learning areas. Knowledge is power; contribution is positive—we have to learn to use power in positive ways.

Self-Understanding

YOU



Knowledge

INPUT



Connection

YOU +



Competency

OUTPUT



Competency

The use of knowledge is dependent on competency: the skills needed for learning and, in turn, its application. These corresponding functions are responsible for our output, what we choose and are able to “put out in” the world. The core competencies required are a *commitment* to your goals, the ability to *collaborate* and *communicate* effectively, and the *creativity* and *critical thinking* required to solve problems and come up with solutions. Consider how you go about learning something new. It might be through communicating and collaborating with others. It might be on the internet, which requires its own form of communication (and often creativity and commitment) to find information and critically examine its efficacy. Lived experience offers inputs that shape who we are. Processing what’s inside us and turning it into something that can stand in the world—that’s the other side of competency. We use it to learn, then to use what we learn. At our finest, we use what we learn in inventive, uplifting, *contributive* ways.

... when these elements come together, contribution results.

Eric has a passion for improving his community. He's especially interested in improving his high school, and he has promising ideas for making it a more equitable learning environment. But is Eric committed to seeing those ideas through, or will he give up on his plans if he comes up against obstacles? Can he effectively communicate his ideas to others, or work collaboratively to develop and execute plans? Or maybe he's missing the critical connection or spark of creativity that will lead to solutions? Any one **competency** could be the key.



Competency helps us put learning to work.





Learning +

In summary, contribution is the product of having a positive goal and the skills to acquire and apply understandings that are relevant to that goal. Contribution doesn't require mastery in each learning area; each is a vast spectrum (e.g., from no to total self-understanding), and where we fall on those spectrums can vary significantly between learning areas and change drastically over the course of our lives. The further along we are in each area, the more we're able to contribute, and the greater our potential for success and well-being. The goal is to progress, to advance, to move forward within each of these learning areas, and so toward greater contribution. Our name for this journey is Contributive Learning.

Contributive Learning is the process of discovering who you are, forming connections, developing knowledge and competency, and using them to contribute. We think of it as learning to add to the world.

**CONTRIBUTIVE
LEARNING**



By focusing education on its purpose—contribution—we invite a more intentional focus on the learning areas that make contribution possible, and also on the uses and applications that result. Education takes on much more when imbued with this purpose. It's learning *plus* the contribution that inevitably follows, the positive actions worth exploring in school.

Contributive Learning amplifies academic success. It's hard to learn anything if you don't feel well, and a focus on contribution prioritizes well-being both as a foundation for further learning and as an outcome of the everyday academic process. It also focuses everything students learn on how to apply it (i.e., how to use it to contribute). When students have opportunities to use what they learn, they want to learn more, and their outcomes improve.

Too many students are bored and disengaged. Contributive Learning makes curricular content more engaging, purposeful, and likely to stick by connecting it to students' strengths, interests, and goals. If students see themselves in what they're learning—if the learning is relevant to who they are as individuals—they feel a connection to the content that fuels their experience.



WHAT DO YOU LOVE?

Different students have different interests. Academically, some prefer math, others science, others writing, and so on. Luckily, contributions to society take innumerable forms. If students use what they love (math, science, writing) to improve people's lives, they'll feel happy and well. We've all heard, "It's not what you know, it's how you use it." Communities want students who use it to contribute **—to add to, not subtract from, people's lives and the world.**

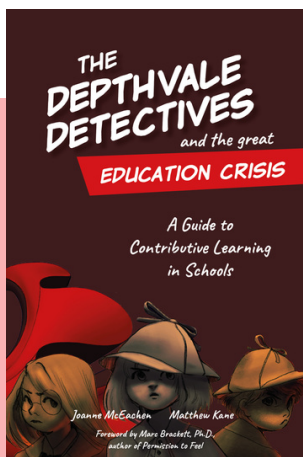


School +

Schools support students in remarkable ways. Each school has its own identity, values, and approaches to improving students' learning and well-being. Contributive Learning doesn't require a blank slate. Rather, it encourages schools to examine what they're doing, what's working, and why, and any ways of further building from their current position by utilizing the collective contributions of staff, students, existing programs, and more. Contribution is a lens through which to examine school activity—strategies, policies, programs, practices—in light of its impact on students and staff. An activity is contributing if it improves learning and well-being. If it doesn't, then the time and resources can be allocated elsewhere.

Schools that are pioneering Contributive Learning are intentionally integrating each of its learning areas. Working within their own academic content areas and curriculum toward context-specific objectives, schools help students discover who they are, develop knowledge and skills, and form connections that guide them toward positive action.

Importantly, Contributive Learning isn't something "taught on the side," a set of lessons or objectives that take time from the curriculum, or something "done" on special occasions or for a set period of time before getting back to work on the subjects at hand. Nor does it tell students who they are or who to be. It provides opportunities for students to explore who they are and who they want to be, within the context of everyday curricular learning, and then to act in accordance with their values and goals.



Utilizing collective contributions . . .

The Depthvale Detectives and the Great Education Crisis

"Every educator will be able to read this, see themselves and their school, and begin to think about how they can truly contribute to their own school community."

Patrick Fisher

Principal, Meramec Elementary, MO, USA



SELF-UNDERSTANDING

Understanding ...

Who you are
How you fit into the world
How you can contribute
Your capacity for success



COMPETENCY

Developing ...

Commitment
Collaboration
Creativity
Communication
Critical Thinking



CONNECTION

Connecting with ...

The people you know
Your environments
Concepts & pursuits
The world



KNOWLEDGE

Knowing ...

Language Arts
Mathematics
Science
History & Geography
The Arts, etc.

What's it take?

Contributive Learning benefits from an integrated approach that aligns leadership, teaching, and learning and embeds a learner-first focus at every level of a school. At the leadership level, teams use strategic measures and tools to strengthen school culture and leadership capability, uncover actions and opportunities, and remove barriers to success. Simultaneously, teachers develop strategies for enhancing what they're already doing and amplifying their impact on students' experiences, focusing on the class learning environment, lesson design, and authentic assessment.

As a result, teachers and students engage in everyday learning that sparks curricular discovery, growth, and contribution, and that paints a clearer picture of each learner and their goals.

Signature Schools

The Learner First works with an international network of Signature Schools committed to school-wide improvement, along with additional partner schools that take a focused approach in targeted areas.

Interested in joining?





Conclusion

You know it when you experience it. Something happens that leaves you in a better place than before, or your actions contribute to someone's life or to a goal. The feeling in those moments is a sense of fulfillment, a sense that your “wholeness,” and that of others, have been added to.

We want every learner to experience this sense of fulfillment—the desired sum total of learning is well-being. With a contributive emphasis across academic contexts, education can more fully deliver on its mission: empowering every student to contribute to the world.



Think about someone who means a lot to you. What are they like? How do they make you feel? What do they do that's so meaningful, and why? By describing this person, you're describing the ways that they add to your life. Your life would be a little more empty, less meaningful, if they didn't contribute in the ways that they do.

The purpose of Contributive Learning is to fill up our classrooms, schools, neighborhoods, and communities with people like that—people who contribute on the strength of their self-understanding, connection, knowledge, and competency, and so succeed while in school and for the rest of their lives.

By adopting the lens of Contributive Learning, school is more purposeful not only for students, but for educators, families, and communities alike. We're all better off when we learn to contribute—when we do what we can, in every possible instance, to tie learning to positive action and impact.

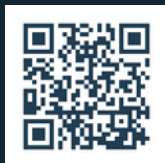
Every contribution is a step on the way.



CONTRIBUTIVE LEARNING

EDUCATION FOR **POSITIVE**
ACTION AND IMPACT

LEARN MORE



 **THE
Learner First™**
ENGAGE | MEASURE | EMPOWER | TRANSFORM

